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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2102
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1222
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000357

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DEPT PASS TO SCA/PB, S/CT
USAID FOR ANE AND CMM, A COURTNEY AND C RUNYAN

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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL BG

SUBJECT: ISLAMIC EXTREMIST GROUP CALLING FOR JIHAD SURFACES
IN SOUTHERN BANGLADESH

REF: STATE 20648

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: A district police superintendent in southern Bangladesh says he has barred activities of a legal Islamic extremist group that advocates the primacy of jihad, which it describes as armed struggle that is required of all true Muslims. Although the police chief said the group's presence in Patuakhali District was negligible, he not only banned it from distributing propaganda but urged local imams to speak out against its teachings. He also plans to stage a rally in the coming weeks to urge vigilance against extremism. His multifaceted offensive suggests a concern among at least some law enforcement officials that the presence of even small extremist groups poses a potential threat in this moderate Muslim-majority nation. Embassy Dhaka believes USG programs that support community policing will help law enforcement officials keep such threats at bay. End Summary.

¶12. (SBU) Hijbut Touhid (other spellings include Hizbut Touhid) is an extremist group founded by Mohammad Bayazid Khan Panni, an imam from Tangail in central Bangladesh who says jihad armed struggle is required of all true believers of Islam. The group is believed to have no more than 5,000 supporters and just a few hundred activists among Bangladesh's 150 million people, according to Mohammad Aurangzeb Mohbub, a top official with the Special Branch of Bangladesh Police. It remains legal because it has not committed violent acts. Still, a survey by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) think tank found that the number of Hijbut Touhid members reported arrested from August 2007 to January 2008 was 45, much more than other Islamic extremist groups, including the outlawed Jamaatul-Mujahedin Bangladesh (JMB) that was behind a notorious nationwide bombing campaign in 2005. Typically, Hijbut Touhid members are arrested for spreading jihadi ideology through speeches and for trying to organize street processions, which violate emergency rules in effect under the current Caretaker Government, according to Ambassador M. Shafiullah, a militancy expert at BEI.

3.(SBU) The Daily Star, Bangladesh's leading English-language newspaper, reported in January that Hijbut Touhid had set up a camp in the southern district of Patuakhali and was distributing books and pamphlets propagating Islamist militancy among villagers. One Hijbut Touhid pamphlet obtained by EmbOffs from local police during a visit to

Patuakhali in February repeatedly glorified jihad. "After being defeated, insulted, despised and hated by other nations, it has become necessary for this (Muslim) nation of 1.5 billion people to understand clearly that Allah will punish us severely and then will choose another nation in our place if we shun jihad," it said. Among the books published by the founder, the pamphlet said, are "This Islam is Not at all Islam" and "Demon? The Jewish-Christian Civilization."

¶4. (SBU) Although the Daily Star newspaper reported that local police allowed the group to organize because it was not officially banned, Patuakhali Superintendent of Police Mohammad Ashrafur Rahman a few weeks later told an interagency Cyclone Sidr assessment team that he had instructed his officers to stop all Hijbut Touhid activity. "I banned this in my area," he told PolOff during a follow-up phone call on March 17.

¶5. (SBU) Rahman estimated no more than 10-15 Hijbut Touhid activists in his region, an amount he described as "negligible." He said the group managed to circulate only a "very few" pamphlets in Patuakhali before he cracked down. The police chief has urged local imams not to accept the extremists' propaganda material. "I said the imams should speak to the people against this group," he said. Rahman also is planning to hold what he described as a rally in April to spread the anti-extremist message to a larger audience.

¶6. (C) Comment: Although Hijbut Touhid is not illegal, it is often likened to a nascent JMB, which began as a small militant Islamist organization but quickly expanded in scope to coordinate a national wave of near simultaneous bombings in 2005. Rahman's action suggests a realization among at

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least some law enforcement officials that even small, legal groups must be monitored carefully to ensure they don't metastasize into larger, virulently violent organizations. "There is sufficient fertile ground in Bangladesh for jihadi ideology," says Ambassador Shafiullah, noting the country's high unemployment rate and fluid political situation. Embassy Dhaka plans to submit an interagency proposal for 1210 funding (reftel) to support community policing in Bangladesh that will help officers such as Rahman respond forcefully against extremism whenever it appears. Meanwhile, a Department of Defense Information Support Team at the Embassy is developing a program for the Government of Bangladesh that would allow citizens to provide tips to law enforcement officials about suspected extremist activity.

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